Logic Models: What Are They, and Why Would Anyone Except Spock Care?

From Vince Hyman, Publishing Director, Fieldstone Alliance:

Logic models actually are for everyone!
Chances are, if you've gotten a grant lately or chatted with a program officer, you've been pressed to talk about your program's "logic model."

The response among nonprofit practitioners could be divided into three types:

1. The nonprofit wonk, shuffling through her purse, saying, "Sure, here's my grandkids, my dog, and a laminated copy of our program's logic model."
2. The jargon-weary exec, sighing "Goody, another 'best practice.'"
3. The deer-in-the-headlights practitioner, petrified by the word "logic."

All these responses are understandable.

I commiserate with those of you who work intuitively and worry that "logic models" will get in your way. The fact that some people don't approach problem-solving with the linear, algebraic mindset of evaluators doesn't make their performance ineffective—it just means they don't think linearly.

Pretty natural for such a person to freeze up, concerned that the alien "model" will a) upset their own effectiveness or b) make their effective approach look illogical and ineffective, when repeated successful outcomes prove the opposite.

But logic models are helpful, because they can help us gain control over our work—and they can expose flaws in our plans. They're a bit like long division: the logic model is a way of showing your work.

Even if you're a nonlinear thinker, or too close to your work to explain the underlying logic, some set of logical steps is bringing the successful outcomes you achieve. Careful thought can help you uncover those steps, or a skilled evaluator can help extract the logic underneath the work.

Two of our recent books offer some tools to help you understand and use logic models: The
Manager's Guide to Program Evaluation (2003) by Paul Mattessich includes a great description of how logic models work. And A Funder's Guide to Evaluation (2005) by Peter York includes a worksheet to help you create your own logic model. This issue of Tools You Can Use includes both.

How and why your program produces the results it gets
Logic models start with a program theory. Whether you've stated it explicitly or not, you do have a program theory. A program theory provides a coherent account of how and why your program generates the results (outcomes) it produces (or is expected to produce).

Let's consider a job skills program. In this program, classroom instruction, job placement, and counseling get people into jobs, with the goal of reducing welfare use. This approach is based on the following program theory: Proper work attitudes along with good job skills and a supervised job placement will lead to stable employment and a reduction of welfare use.

The logic model is a way to illustrate your program's theory. One format for logic models that has become popular during the past few years includes four major components: inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Outcomes are sometimes subdivided into initial outcomes, intermediate outcomes, and longer-term outcomes. The figures below show first what such a model looks like in abstract form, and then as it's applied to a jobs program.
Three very practical uses of logic models
Practical learners like to know how something will help get work done. Here are three tangible reasons for developing a logic model:

1. A logic model helps you understand why something works
2. A logic model tells the story of your program quickly and visually
3. You can apply the model's theory to new and related problems

1. A logic model helps you understand why something works
Let's consider the job skills program. The theory represented by the logic model expresses how a set of three activities (classroom instruction, job placement, and counseling) leads ultimately to a significant social change (reduction of welfare use). This might seem trivial, but it is certainly not. To illustrate why, imagine two communities, each of which separately initiates a job skills program. The only difference between the two is that Community A has no program theory, while Community B does have a program theory.

In both communities, the number of people on welfare declines only very slightly after the first year of program operation. Due to the expense of the program, public officials, and the public at large have become skeptical and demand that either outcomes improve or the program be discontinued.

Community A, without a program theory--thus without any clear explanation of the dynamics of reducing welfare dependency through job skills training--has no options other than to stay the course or to stop the program (and either do nothing or try a different program). If you disagree with this, try to explain what else Community A can do without using terms similar to those in the boxes labeled Outputs, Initial Outcomes, and Intermediate Outcomes.
Community B, on the other hand, has more options. For instance, it can reflect on the Initial Outcomes section of its program theory and measure how well program participants did on improving work attitudes, acquiring job skills, and obtaining placements. Assume that Community B discovers that participants who accomplish all three leave welfare, whereas those who do only one or two do not leave welfare. Community B can then change its activities to increase the likelihood that participants will accomplish all three Initial Outcomes.

The reason why Community B could take steps to improve it effectiveness, while Community A could not, is that Community B had something--a program theory--that enabled it to understand how and why the job skills program leads to the intended outcomes.

2. A logic model tells the story of your program quickly and visually
Note how easily and succinctly the job skills program logic model shows what the program does, what it ultimately hopes to accomplish, and everything that logically occurs in between. In the previous example, think how many more tools Community B’s program will have to defend itself against cutbacks, while Community A's program is virtually defenseless.

3. You can apply the model’s theory to new and related problems
If the job skills program used by Community B eventually proves successful, one can ask whether a program that combines instruction, placement, and follow-up could be applied to similar problems that require individual change. For example, could the theory be adapted to help with school attendance issues? Programs that help people reenter the community after prison?

Create your own logic model
Peter York, in A Funder's Guide to Evaluation, includes a worksheet to help you develop a logic model for your program (sample below). Note that he uses some terms a bit differently than Mattessich: York's worksheet uses the term strategies to include the activities a program offers. And rather than dividing outcomes into initial, intermediate, and longer-term, York uses short and longer-term, and describes the longest term outcomes as impact. The last is a useful distinction, since most organizations care about their impact--it is the realization of their mission.
### Logic Model Development Tool

**Instructions:** Use the following worksheet as a simple tool for developing a logic model. Identify the key stakeholders you would like involved in developing the logic model. Then, convene these stakeholders and facilitate a process that elicits everyone’s assumptions as to their answers to the following questions. Each of these questions needs to be asked and answered fully, in the order that they appear.

1. **What is the community-level impact (change) that our organization would like to contribute significantly to creating as a result of our programs?**

2. **What are the long-term outcomes we would like our clients to achieve? Specifically, what behavioral changes would we like to see our clients make as a result of our programs and services?**

3. **What are the short-term outcomes we would like our clients to achieve? Specifically, what cognitive, emotional, motivational, skill, or perception change would we like to see our clients make as a direct result of our programs and services?**

4. **What programs, strategies, or services do we need to achieve the short- and long-term outcomes?**

5. **What resources or inputs do we need to support strategy or service implementation?**

6. **What is going on in the community or in our clients' lives that we have no control over but that could affect the quality of our programs or the success of our clients?**

Place your responses in the appropriate boxes in the Logic Model Worksheet, and don't forget to draw arrows showing the causal relationships between inputs or resources, strategies, and outcomes.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logic Model Worksheet</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inputs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All of the resources necessary for supporting a program</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YOUR INPUTS</th>
<th>YOUR STRATEGIES</th>
<th>YOUR OUTPUTS</th>
<th>YOUR OUTCOMES</th>
<th>YOUR IMPACT</th>
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**Environmental Context:** Factors beyond our control

Remember, the end result of all this logic modeling is really to enable you to do a better job accomplishing your mission.

Best regards,

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July 26, 2005

3 Excerpted and adapted from pages 30-32 of *The Manager's Guide to Program Evaluation*. 